

The President Calling

TRANSCRIPT

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Operator: The president on line sir.
JFK: Hello? How you doing?

Music: Hail to the Chief {compressed and scratchy as through phone}...telephone noises mixed underneath

Smith: From Minnesota Public Radio, this is an American RadioWorks special report, White House Tapes...The President Calling. I'm Stephen Smith.

JFK: We gotta get this under control...{fade under}

In 1962...President John F. Kennedy bugged his office and tapped his telephone.

JFK: If we attacked Cuba it's going to be nuclear war...

Three US presidents...John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon...secretly taped White House meetings and phone calls.

LBJ: Jackie?
JK: Mr. President?
LBJ: I love you...

The practice ended when Richard Nixon's covert tapes led to his resignation over Watergate.

Nixon: Now, I've got something to tell you in the greatest of confidence...

Over the coming hour...we'll listen in as three presidents work the phone.

Doyle: These phone tapes are so extraordinary because all of a sudden you've got that kind of window right into a president's mind and heart.

Stay with us to hear the mind and heart of The President Calling...a special report from American RadioWorks, the national documentary unit of Minnesota Public Radio. First, this news update.

Sound: busy signal... FADES OUT

From Minnesota Public Radio this is an American RadioWorks special report... The President Calling...the secret telephone tapes of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. I'm Stephen Smith.

Music: Period presidential music

In 1879...the White House got its first telephone. Rutherford B. Hayes was president...and in the days before operators and switchboards...one telephone was wired directly to another, so the only place President Hayes could

call was the Treasury Department. Even so, the president declared this primitive device "one of the greatest events since creation."

Music: 1962 tune... "Green Onions"

JFK: Hello? Hello Dave?

In the summer of 1962, President John F. Kennedy added a new feature to the White House: a secret recording system.

JFK: Hello? Dave?!

He ordered the Secret Service to install hidden microphones in the Oval Office and Cabinet Room...and to put a tap on his telephones.

JFK: Dave I notice in the paper this morning where the Swedish team beat the American hockey team 17 to 2.

David Hackett: Yeah, I saw that

JFK: Christ, who are we sending over there, girls?... {fades out}

Kennedy recorded trivial talk with friends and serious conversations about high-stakes decisions. JFK's personal secretary said Kennedy started making secret tapes after the calamitous Bay of Pigs invasion...when advisors who privately urged him to attack Cuba later disavowed the plan. By October 1962, when Kennedy dialed up former President Dwight Eisenhower for advice on the Cuban Missile Crisis, he could tape the call.

JFK: General, what about if the Soviet Union-Khrushchev-announces tomorrow, which I think he will, that if we attack Cuba that it's going to be nuclear war? And what's your judgment as to the chances they'll fire these things off if we invade Cuba?

Eisenhower: Oh, I don't believe they will.

President Kennedy: You don't think they will?

Eisenhower: No.

President Kennedy: In other words you would take that risk if the situation seemed desirable?

Eisenhower: Well, as a matter of fact, what can you do?

President Kennedy: Yeah.

Eisenhower: If this thing is such a serious thing, that we're going to be uneasy and we know what thing is happening now. All right, you've got to use something.

President Kennedy: Yeah.

Eisenhower: Something may make these people shoot them off. I just don't believe this will.

President Kennedy: Yeah, right {Chuckles}

Eisenhower: In any event, of course, I'll say this: I'd want to keep my own people very alert.

President Kennedy: Yeah. Well, we'll hang on tight. Thanks a lot General.

It's a remarkable thing to be able to eavesdrop on the American president like this...to overhear the world's most powerful politician using direct conversation to make history. Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon made even more tapes than Kennedy. All three presidents wanted a private record of their daily work in the White House...in part, to help write their memoirs later. But none of them ever dreamed we would listen in.

Tape: Mr President?

LBJ: Yessir.

RR: Dick Russell...

LBJ: Good God I'd rather hear your voice than hear Jesus this morning. How you feeling? {fade under}

Thousands of hours of these White House recordings are now open to the public. Lyndon Johnson once told an aide that listening to his tapes could teach more about how government really works than reading a hundred political science textbooks. Almost every presidential decision is an act of political calculus.

LBJ: Why don't we make her Ambassador to one of the uh, Luxembourg? {fade under}

In 1965...Johnson talked with Secretary of State Dean Rusk about finding a job for Patricia Roberts Harris... a young, African American law professor.

LBJ: I've been talking to these women...I want to move them up. Women and Negroes.

Rusk: Well, one thing for example, if she were our deputy legal advisor she'd do a lot more work and be more help to us than she would be as Ambassador to Luxembourg.

LBJ: Yes, but it wouldn't have the honor and the standing and the status and the glory that all the Negroes want - and the women...{fade under}

Johnson did post Harris in Luxembourg...making her the first black woman to serve as a US ambassador. Though American Presidents wield enormous political and military power...they have long grumbled about how hard it can be to get their way ...especially with Congress.

LBJ: So I'm just fighting this battle best I can and I think I'll win it but cannot influence the Republicans....

Lyndon Johnson was always on the phone to members of Congress trading favors and seeking help on legislation. Historian Robert Dallek says one of the president's most valuable gifts is the power to persuade.

Dallek: You know, getting a telephone call from a president is something that gets your attention and Kennedy and Johnson and Nixon knew it. And so they used telephone calls in a very effective way to reach out to people they wanted to enlist in their behalf.

Nixon: Hello?

Robert Finch: Yes, Mr. President.

Richard Nixon used the phone to rally support within his own White House. In 1973, as the Watergate scandal closed in... Nixon counseled his aide Robert Finch on how to keep up morale.

Nixon: I'd always just say we just have confidence in the integrity of the president. This is one of those rare presidents who has the guts to investigate...I mean, to...uh...conduct an investigation of his own team. And in the end they're going to realize that this whole goddamned Watergate thing was about a crappy little thing that everybody shouldn't have gotten that excited about.

Finch: That's right.

Nixon: It'll pass, it'll pass.

Doyle: On the telephone, it's purely your thoughts and your speech.

Historian Bill Doyle has written a book about the secret white house tapes.

And that's why these phone tapes are so extraordinary because all of a sudden you've got that window right into a president's mind and heart and the way he's thinking at that time. {newsreel music under}

For the rest of this hour we'll look through that window to see how Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon used the telephone to shape history.

Archival tape: At Oxford integration of the University of Mississippi becomes a one-man crusade. When Air Force veteran James Meredith tries to register the police lines drawn, US Marshals blocked... {fades under}

In September of 1962...John F. Kennedy's mind is preoccupied with a civil rights crisis at the University of Mississippi. No African American had ever attended the state's most prestigious and tradition-bound school...known

affectionately as Ole Miss. The US Supreme Court had outlawed school segregation in 1954...When James Meredith tested the law eighty years later, he was blocked from attending Ole Miss by the Governor himself.

Barnett: I, Ross R. Barnett...do hereby now, and finally, deny you admission to the University of Mississippi.

The stand-off has a Civil War flavor. An old-style southern democrat, Ross Barnett declares that Mississippi segregation laws trump Congress and the US Supreme Court. President Kennedy is also a democrat...but a young, bred-in-the-bone Yankee from Massachusetts.

JFK phone: Hello Governor? I just talked to the attorney general... {fade under}

The situation at Oxford Mississippi is one of President Kennedy's first big civil rights confrontations. His second-in-command is his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. On September 29th and 30th, 1962...the President has a series of conversations with Governor Barnett. He hopes to manage this crisis by telephone.

JFK : ...well now here's my problem Governor. Listen, I didn't put him in Univ but under Constitution I have to carry out orders. I'd like to get your help in doing that. {fade under}

Tape: This is Bill Doyle again. The Kennedys wanted James Meredith into the university not because they were radical integrationists but because a federal court order ordered the president to get Meredith in essentially. And, the Kennedys did not want to send in troops. They were afraid that would kick off a bloody situation.

JFK: {fade up} ...The problem is whether we can get some help in getting this fellow in this week.

Barnett: Uh you know what I'm up against Mr. President. I took an oath you know to abide by the laws of this state...

JFK: That's right...

RB: ...And out constitution here and the const. Of the US. I'm on the spot here. ..

JFK: But the problem is governor I have my responsibility just like you have yours. And my responsibility of course is to the...

RB: I realize that and I appreciate that so much.

JFK: I know...we don't want to have a lot of people getting hurt or killed down there...

Barnett: That's correct, Mr. President....{fade under}

Tape: Ross Barnett has got them wrapped around his finger.

Civil rights historian Taylor Branch.

Branch: And he's being kind of a yokel and all that saying thanks for your help on the poultry program and all this business.

Barnett: I appreciate you interest in our poultry program and all those things.

JFK: {chuckling...} Well, we're...

Barnett: Thank you so much.

JFK: OK Governor, thank you.

Barnett: Yes sir. Alright.. {fades under}

Branch: But, you know Bobby Kennedy and Jack Kennedy are running Meredith up and down and trying to do whatever Barnett wants so that Barnett's not too upset. They're never sure if he's making a fool of them or they're making a fool of him. But they feel less and less in control so the suspicion starts to rise that maybe Barnett's making fool of them.

JFK: Hello?

RB: Alright.

JFK: Governor. This is the president speaking.

RB: Yes sir, Mr. President, ... {fade under}

JFK: I know you feeling about the law of Mississippi and the fact that you don't want to carry out that court order. What we really want to have from you is some understanding about whether the state police will maintain law and order.

{fades under...keeps rolling}

Instead of dispatching the US Army...President Kennedy sends scores of Federal Marshals to Mississippi. -- lightly armed men clad awkwardly in suits, ties and gas masks.

Doyle: Now Ross Barnett desperately wanted the Kennedys to flood Mississippi with combat troops because that's the only way Ross Barnett could tell his white segregationist backers, hey I did everything I could, I fought them, but to prevent bloodshed in the end I made a deal.

JFK: ... And I'd like assurance from you that state police down there will take positive action to maintain law and order.

Barnett: They'll take positive action to maintain law and order as best we can... we have 220 highway patrolmen and they'll absolutely be unarmed...

JFK: Well no, but the problem is...{fade under...}

Now, Kennedy wants the Mississippi patrolmen unarmed so they don't start shooting at the federal Marshals. Meanwhile...radio stations across the South are blaring bulletins about the situation, and white racists are grabbing their guns to head for Oxford.

JFK: Now what about the suggestions made by the Attorney General in regard to not permitting people to congregate and start a mob?

RB: Well, we'll do our best to keep them from congregating, but that's hard to do you know.

JFK: Well, tell them to move along...

RB: You got them up on the sidewalks, different sides of the streets, what are you gonna do about it?

JFK: Well now, as I understand it Governor you will do everything you can to maintain law and order.

Barnett: I'll do everything in my power to maintain order... {fades under}

Governor Barnett in fact does not maintain order. He negotiates secretly with the Kennedys to step aside when Federal Marshals arrive with Meredith...but then takes one more opportunity to grandstand before his segregationist supporters. On September 29th, Barnett makes a defiant speech at a Saturday night Ole Miss football game.

Barnett to crowd: I love Mississippi...[crowd cheers] I love her people...[crowd cheers] Our customs...[crowd cheers] I love and respect our heritage...[crowd cheers]

{fade under}

The next day, hundreds of outraged white protestors flood Oxford to block Meredith's arrival. A full-scale riot is brewing. Attorney General Robert Kennedy makes an angry call to Barnett...one that unfortunately was not recorded.

Doyle: The absolute climax of these tortured potentially deadly negotiations between the governor of Mississippi and the Kennedy Administration was forced by the disclosure by Bobby Kennedy that he either had good notes or he had a tape of the conversation. We've got it all down governor. Tonight the president is going to tell the world that you've been secretly negotiating with us. Which Bobby Kennedy knew would kill Ross Barnett politically. The threat of a tape was what forced Barnett's capitulation and he then basically started begging and pleading with the Kennedys not to tell the world about that.

To keep the secret, Barnett agrees to the Kennedy plan: get Meredith safely lodged on campus that evening so he can register for classes Monday morning. But federal troops can't get to Oxford before nightfall...and the Marshals lose control.

Newsreel: Just after dark Meredith is flown into Oxford. On his previous attempts to register he was accompanied by only a handful of Marshals, this time the forces increased tenfold and more... It is not enough to avert a night of rioting leaving two dead and the campus the shambles of a battlefield... {fade under}

The night air in Oxford is sharp with gunfire and tear gas. Governor Barnett is at the state capitol in Jackson...on the phone again to Kennedy in Washington. Barnett tries one more time to finesse the President. He suggests pulling Meredith back off the campus until things calm down.

RB: I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. President. I'll go up there myself.

JFK: Well, now how long will it take you to get there?

RB: And, I'll get a microphone and tell them that you have agreed for him to be removed...

JFK: No, no, now, wait a minute Governor. Now, how long is it going to take you to get up there?

RB: About an hour.

JFK: I'll tell you what, if you want to go up there, then you call me from up there then we'll decide what we're going to do before we make any speeches about it.

RB: Well, alright. Mr. President please, why don't you, can't you give an order to remove Meredith?

JFK: How can I remove him Governor when there's a riot in the street and he may step out of the building and something happen to him. I can't remove him under those conditions. Let's get order up there, then we can do something about Mer-

RB: You can surround him with plenty of officials.

JFK: Well, we've got to get somebody up there now to get order and stop the firing and the shooting then you and I will talk on the phone about Meredith.

RB: Alright then, alright.

President Kennedy and Governor Barnett keep talking, but the riot in Oxford forces both men to do what they wanted most to avoid: Barnett has to step aside without his valiant last stand...Kennedy has to storm Mississippi with federal troops.

Newsreel: and James Meredith becomes a duly registered student at the University of Mississippi...

Historians say that John F. Kennedy simply did not understand the depth and ferocity of Southern racism. The President thought segregation was illogical...and that a cogent argument could make that clear to Ross Barnett. But the Kennedy-Barnett telephone calls show how hard it is for two leaders to work out a problem if they don't speak the same political language.

[Music up]

This is Stephen Smith you're listening to The President Calling... still to come...Lyndon Johnson and Jackie Kennedy.

JK: Mr. President.

LBJ: I just wanted you to know you were loved and by so many and so much and -

JK: Oh, Mr. President!

LBJ: - I'm one of them.... {fade under}

To hear more of the secret presidential tapes...visit our web site, American RadioWorks dot org. You're listening to White House Tapes: The President Calling from American RadioWorks, part of public radio's special coverage, "Whose Democracy Is It."

The program continues in just a moment, from NPR, National Public Radio.

You're listening to a special report from American RadioWorks, The President Calling - the secret telephone tapes of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. I'm Stephen Smith.

{news montage}: This is the Voice of America. President Kennedy is dead. The president of the United States was shot down by an assassin's bullet...

...We have received news from NBC that Vice President Johnson was sworn in as president on the aircraft bringing him from Dallas, Texas...

LBJ speech: My fellow Americans. All I have I would have given gladly not to be standing here today. {fade under...}

{Music...}

When Lyndon Johnson becomes president, he is 55 years old. He is a veteran of Washington politics...having served in Congress for more than a quarter century. A White House aid once described Lyndon Johnson as 13 of the most interesting and difficult men he ever knew. The telephone tapes reveal a passionate man using the many shades of his personality - cunning or foolish, threatening or seductive - to wield power and bring about change.

JK: Yes?

Operator: Mrs. Kennedy on 2191..

JK: Mr. President?

LBJ: I just wanted you to know you were loved and by so many and so much and -

JK: Oh, Mr. President!

LBJ: - I'm one of them.... {fade under}

Of all the people Johnson reaches out to in his first weeks as president, few are more important to him than Jackie Kennedy, widow of the slain president. The two have traded letters since JFK's funeral and on December 2nd...LBJ calls her.

JACQUELINE: I know how rare a letter is in a President's handwriting. Do you know that I've got more in your handwriting than I do in Jack's now?

LBJ: I want you to just know this, that I told my mama a long time ago, when everybody else gave up about my election in '48 -

JACQUELINE: Yes?

LBJ: My mother and my wife and my sisters and you females got a lot of courage that we men don't have. And so we have to rely on you and depend on you, and you've got something to do. You've got the President relying on you. And this is not the first one you've had! So there're not many women, you know, running around with a good many Presidents. So you just bear that in mind. You've got the biggest job of your life!

JACQUELINE: "She ran around with two Presidents." That's what they'll say about me!

LBJ: [chortles]

JACQUELINE: Okay! Anytime!

LBJ: [kissing noises] Goodbye, darling.

JACQUELINE: Thank you for calling, Mr. President. Goodbye.

LBJ: Bye, sweetie. Do come by.

JACQUELINE: I will.

Johnson's phone calls with the young widow demonstrate his skill at blending the personal and the political. Historian Robert Dallek.

Dallek: Johnson saw Jackie Kennedy as an important, symbolic or emblematic figure. After all, she's the wife of the martyred president and she has of course two very young children and they'll never get to know their father. And so he acts with great compassion and he wants to comfort her as much as he can on the one hand and on the other hand he wants her, so to speak, to stay close to the White House so that it continues to give him a kind of legitimacy as the successor to JFK.

[Music cue]

Compared to the immensely popular Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson is a relatively unknown figure to the nation. Kennedy had been youthful and witty - he looked especially good on television. Johnson is an oversized man with Bryl Cream in his hair and a ponderous way of speaking to the public. But LBJ is easy to underestimate. As the taped telephone calls show...Johnson can be a relentless persuader. His brow-beating became known as the Johnson Treatment.

LBJ: You're my man on that commission and you're going to do it. And don't tell me what you can and what you can't. Because I can't arrest you and I'm not gonna put the FBI on you, but you're Goddamn sure gonna serve, I'll tell you that... {fade under}

It's less than a week after JFK's assassination...and Johnson wants to appoint his long-time friend, Senate Democrat Richard Russell of Georgia to a high-level investigative commission. But Russell doesn't like the panel's chairman... Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren...and doesn't want to serve under him. So Johnson simply announces Russell's appointment...then phones him.

Russell: Mr President you ought to have told me you was gonna name me.

LBJ: I told you. I told you today I was gonna name the chief justice when I called you.

Russell: You did not...

LBJ: I did...

Russell: You didn't tell me you was gonna name him...

LBJ: I told you I was gonna name Warren and you said it would be Better to name Harlan...

Russell: Mr. President, please now.

LBJ: No, it's already done, it's been announced, Hell, I can't run this country by myself.

Russell: Well you ought not to be so persuasive.

LBJ: Well, I think I ought to.

[Music Cue]

The dispute with Russell over who said what is an example of why Lyndon Johnson taped his phone conversations. John Powers...an expert on the presidential tapes at the National Archives...says LBJ used transcripts of the recordings to keep track of details and hold people to their word, especially in LBJ's hectic first two years in office when he set out to fight poverty and reform America.

Powers: President Johnson was a consumer of information and his primary way to communicate was through the telephone.

LBJ: Is this Mary Bunting? This is Lyndon Johnson, Miss Bunting...{fade under}

Powers: He would make between 40 and 60 telephone calls a day. And he would record a good majority of those, if not most of them.

Operator: He's on 9-0, he's on 9-0. Yeah?

[receiver picked up]

LBJ: Juanita, please get off the phone, honey.

The President twirled his finger or said "take this" when he wanted Juanita Roberts or his other secretaries to tape a call. The secretaries often forgot to turn the machines off, capturing conversations the President didn't necessarily want on the record.

LBJ: Mr. Hagger?

Hagger: Yes, this is Joe Hagger.

LBJ: Joe, is your father the one that makes clothes?

Hagger: Yes, we're all together.

LBJ: Uh huh... {fade under}

On an August Sunday in 1964 President Johnson is at his ranch in Texas. He calls the chairman of the Haggar Company in Dallas to order some custom-made slacks. LBJ's instructions are particularly graphic.

LBJ: I want 'em half an inch larger in the waist than they were before. The pockets when I sit down in the chair, the knife and your money comes out. So I need at least another inch in the pockets. Another thing - the crotch, down where your nuts hang - is always a little too tight, because they cut me, it's like riding a wire fence. See if you can't leave me an inch from where the zipper (burp) ends, right back to my bunghole. {fade under}

Doyle: He went through life violating pretty much all the laws of interpersonal behavior.

Historian Bill Doyle.

Doyle: You know he would wrap his arms around you and shake you and breathe into your nose to get you to do something so uh, maybe he realized the dramatic value and the shock value of pretty much everything he did...He should not be ashamed of the fact that he used this shock and this personality to deliver the transfiguring moment in American post-war history, the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, which was a shining transformation of our nation. [music fades in]

Music: civil rights song {fade under}

When Lyndon Johnson takes office one of his great ambitions is to expand civil rights for African Americans. The White House Tapes show Johnson waging the fight on many fronts. In calls from 1964 and 65...Johnson collaborates with two powerful figures, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and, his nemesis, the Director of the FBI.

Operators: Yes please? I have J. Edgar Hoover.

Hoover: Mr President. I wanted to let you know we found the car.

LBJ: Yeah?

Hoover: The car was burned and we do not know yet whether any bodies are inside the car because of the intense heat...{fades under}

June 1964... three civil rights workers are murdered in Mississippi and the Ku Klux Klan is thought to be involved. The FBI is investigating, but President Johnson wants more. He presses Hoover to crack down on the Klan. The FBI director is reluctant. Historian Taylor Branch says Hoover didn't like black people. And there was another reason.

Hoover didn't want to go into Mississippi because the Chairman of the judiciary committee, Jim Eastland, is from Mississippi and that's where Hoover gets all of his bread buttered, his budget and everything else. And he knew Eastland was in bed with the Klan in Mississippi, so he did everything he could not to go in there and Johnson had to maneuver him.

So, Johnson sends former CIA director Allen Dulles to Mississippi to assess the situation.

Branch: For J. Edgar Hoover that's pushing his worst button because he'd always wanted to be the CIA director. And Johnson's essentially saying well we'll let Allen go down there and tell you what needs to be done and Hoover was just, his teeth were clenched, you know, because he was embarrassed.

Hoover lets the White House know he is unhappy. Johnson wants Hoover to feel threatened...but not too threatened. So LBJ calls Hoover to reassure him.

LBJ: ...If I'd have thought for one moment that it was something that would affect you in any way, I would have picked up the phone and called you because I haven't got a better friend in this government than you and I always will have...

Hoover: Allen Dulles stopped by to see me this morning and he told me he'd have several inquiries from the press about whether he was going to take over the investigation -

LBJ: - Ain't nobody here who's gonna take over anything from you as long as I'm living - ain't nobody gonna take our thirty-year friendship and mess it up one bit.

Hoover: Well don't you have any concern about that.

LBJ: [laughs] I won't. God bless you.

Hoover: Bye.

Johnson's gambit works. Hoover sets up an FBI bureau in Mississippi and steps up surveillance of the Klan. Meanwhile, the FBI is also spying on the nation's leading civil rights figure, Martin Luther King Jr. Hoover despises King...seeing him as a subversive threat to America. He orders his agents to tap King's phones and bug his rooms. Hoover supplies Johnson with surveillance files on King, particularly his sexual liaisons. President Johnson basically ignores the smear campaign, reaching out to King as a powerful ally in the civil rights struggle.

MLK speech: We must say give us the ballot. We are determined to have the ballot and we are determined to have it now... {crossfade}

Music: I'm gonna be a registered voter... {fade under}

January 1965...the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. arrives in Selma, Alabama, demanding the right to vote for black people. A master at political strategy, Lyndon Johnson recognizes an opportunity. To pass a voting rights bill, LBJ needs the nation to see a vivid case of discrimination against black people trying to register. He calls Reverend King in Selma.

LBJ: ...If you can find the worst condition of being denied the right to cast a vote...and if you just take that one illustration and get it on radio and get it on television, get it every place you can, pretty soon, the fellow that didn't do anything but drive a tractor will say, "Well, that's not right. That's not fair." And then that will help us on what we are going to shove through in the end...And if we do that...it will be the greatest achievement of my administration...So that's what we've got to do now. And you get in there and help us.

King: Well, Mr. President I certainly appreciate... {fade under}

King's side of the conversation is hard to hear on tape...but he readily agrees. The civil rights leader is already doing what Johnson wants in Selma.

Tape: You beat people bloody in order that they will not have the privilege to vote ... {fade under}

Months of demonstrations in Selma stir the national outrage Johnson needs to introduce a Voting Rights bill. Local police attack peaceful marchers with clubs and tear gas...and three civil rights demonstrators are killed. One is Viola Liuzzo, a white woman shot to death while driving a black man home from a march. The morning after the killing...Hoover proudly calls the president with news: an FBI informant was riding in the car with Liuzzo's killers, three members of the Klan.

JEH: ...We've got the informant in the office and we're talking to him because he's scared to death - naturally, because he fears for his life. But uh...

LBJ: What is an infiltrator and an informant? You hire someone and they join the Klan and keep?

JEH: No, we go to someone who, who is in the Klan and persuade him to work for the government. We pay him for it. Sometimes they demand a pretty high price, other times they don't. Now this man we asked now, this informant, he's not a regular agent of the Bureau. But he's one of these people that we put in, just like we do into the Communist party, and so forth, so they'll keep us informed. And fortunately, he happened to be in on this thing last night. Otherwise we would be looking for a needle in a haystack.

LBJ: That's wonderful, Edgar. Thank you so much.

JEH: Thank you. [hang up]

Branch: Johnson, the president, essentially maneuvered Hoover into taking a more active role in civil rights - not just as a spy, but as law enforcement.

Historian Taylor Branch.

Branch: But he didn't get very far because as soon as Vietnam came along and Johnson wanted Hoover to play more of a spy's role to disparage Vietnam critics.

[Music cue... 60s sounding Vietnam tune fade under]

In 1964 and 65...Lyndon Johnson's victories on Civil Rights laws and on social programs such as Medicare and Head Start marked the peak of his political influence. But, Johnson's simultaneous decision to escalate the conflict in Vietnam would destroy his presidency.

LBJ: Yes?

Operator: Mr. President, Secretary McNamara on 9-0.

LBJ: Bob, I hate to bother you but, tell me, I saw a little glimmer of hope on Vietnam in some paper today.. {fade under}

Beginning in the spring of 1964...Johnson spends hours on the phone seeking advice on the war. Some 30 thousand Americans are in Vietnam acting as military advisors to the South Vietnamese government. But the South appears to be losing to communist North Vietnam. In a call to his defense secretary, Robert McNamara, on April 30th, Johnson grasps for a way to beat back the North Vietnamese without sending more American soldiers.

LBJ: Let's get some more of something, my friend, because I'm going to have heart attack if you don't get me something. I just sit here every day. And this war that I'm not doing much about fighting it. I'm not doing much about winning it. I just read about it. {fade under}

Lyndon Johnson was clear on one thing: he would not be the man to lose Vietnam to communism. Critics have long accused him of a willful disregard for the dangers of plunging the United States into war. But historian Michael Hunt says when LBJ's telephone tapes were released in the 1990s...the view of Johnson's thinking grew more complicated.

Hunt: One of the reasons that I think the tapes are really, for me such a revelation. Rather than kind of a dumb cowboy, or a mindless cold warrior, you really get in these tapes someone who understands the issues and is wrestling with them.

Operator: Senator Russell..

RUSSELL: ...{upcut} pretty good. How are you Mr. President?

LBJ: Oh, I got lots of troubles.

RUSSELL: Well, we all have those. {fade under}

In May of 1964, Johnson calls his friend and political mentor Richard Russell... chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Johnson is being pressured by advisors to send more US troops to Vietnam.

LBJ: I would say that it pretty well adds up to them now, that we've got to show some power and some force... this will be a domino that will kick off a whole list of others, and I... I don't think the people of the country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less.

RUSSELL: Yeah, I know, but you go to send a whole lot of our boys out there-

LBJ: Yeah, that's right. That's exactly right. I've got a little old sergeant over that works for me over at the house and he's got six children and I just put him up as the United States Army and Air Force and Navy every time I think about making this decision and think about sending that father of those six kids in there. And what the hell are we going to get out of his doing it? And it just makes the chills run up my back. {fade under}

Dallek: Remember, this is the politician speaking. He's a masterful politician.

Robert Dallek says when Johnson solicits advice...even from close friends like Richard Russell...he may exaggerate how much he shares their views. Posturing was Johnson's way to get information or influence opinion. In this case, Senator Russell is deeply skeptical of sending more US troops to Vietnam and Johnson knows it.

Dallek: In some ways this was a kind of a guise, a kind of act that he was putting on and you can't trust these words of doubt as the full measure of what he really was thinking about Vietnam.

After winning re-election in November of 1964... Johnson begins a massive escalation of US bombing and troop deployments to Vietnam. But Johnson senses the struggle his GIs will have fighting a jungle war against a highly motivated enemy. In June of '65 he speaks with Senator Birch Bayh. {fade in}

LBJ: And I really believe they last longer than we do. One of their boys gets down in a rut and he stays there for two days without water, food, or anything and never moves. Waiting to ambush somebody. Now an American, he stays there about twenty minutes and, God damn, he's got to get him a cigarette! {snorts} ...

Wisecracks aside...Lyndon Johnson is pessimistic. In a June 21st call with defense secretary McNamara...Johnson describes how the future may...in fact, how it will unfold: with domestic opposition growing to a distant war the US does not know how to win.

LBJ: It's going to be difficult for us to very long prosecute effectively a war that far away from home with the divisions that we have here-and particularly the potential divisions. That's really had me concerned for a month. And I'm very depressed about it because I see no program from either Defense or State that gives me much hope of doing anything, except just praying and gasping to hold on and hope they'll quit. I don't believe they're ever going to quit. And I don't see how we have any way of plan for a victory, militarily or diplomatically.

{Music fade under}

Nevertheless...Lyndon Johnson plunges ahead. Historian Michael Hunt.

Hunt: Johnson is a tragic figure. I think, here's a guy who's an incredibly effective political figure with a vision for domestic affairs that he's making good on...caught, sort of sideswiped by this weakness, this inability to control Vietnam.

Michael Hunt says listening to the LBJ tapes is to hear a man making a decision that will tear up his country and cripple his presidency. The war will kill 58-thousand Americans and more than a million Vietnamese. LBJ's presidency will be consumed by Vietnam -- and in 1968 Lyndon Johnson announces he will not run for reelection.

{Music continues}

This is Stephen Smith...You're listening to The President Calling... a special report from American RadioWorks, the national documentary unit of Minnesota Public Radio. Coming up...the biggest taper of them all...Richard Nixon.

Nixon: Goddamn it, I'm never going to discuss this son-of-a-bitching Watergate thing again-never, never, never, never.

There are more than 2000 hours of White House tapes open to the public... and you can hear a lot of them by surfing to our website...AmericanRadioWorks dot org. There you can also order a copy of the new book and cd set White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President published as part of this documentary project by The New Press. That's AmericanRadioWorks dot org.

White House Tapes: The President Calling is part of public radio's special coverage: "Whose Democracy is It."

Major funding for American RadioWorks comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the members of Minnesota Public Radio. Our program continues in just a moment from NPR, National Public Radio.

[Music]

You're listening to a special report from American RadioWorks, The President Calling - the secret white house telephone tapes of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. I'm Stephen Smith.

TV SPOT: This is John Wayne and I'm voting for Richard Nixon. He's the man we need to establish law and order in this country and respect abroad. Let's be proud of America again.

Music: "Nixon Now" campaign jingle [fades under]

Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968 as the candidate for order and decency. He vowed to calm a country in turmoil over race riots, hippies, free love and the Vietnam War. Nixon portrayed himself as a man of humble origins and bedrock, religious virtue. But Richard Nixon's White House tapes would expose him also as a cynical, profane, deeply complicated man. A warning to listeners - his language can be vulgar.

{Music, fade under}

Nixon montage: Just be as mean and rough as they said you were... the order is to leave the Goddamn thing alone...but these bastards are a bunch of snobs and so forth...I don't like the sonofabitch... and do that right away or Goddammit I'll fire this whole f---ing staff, do you understand that?

{ "Nixon Now" jingle swells and fades under }

Three years into his term...Nixon had hidden microphones placed in several of his offices and taps put on his phones. Nixon's secret recordings became public during the Watergate scandal... and some showed Nixon breaking the law and abusing his Presidential authority. Once discovered...they ended his career. But the Watergate tapes are just a fraction of the nearly 4000 hours of conversation Nixon recorded. The vast audio collection gives a glimpse of his tangled personality - by turns confident and paranoid, thoughtful and ruthless.

News sound: antiwar protest, circa 4/18/71 {fade under}

Vietnam War protestors swarmed Washington in 1971...they hear Nixon began taping. On April 18th...talking with his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman...the president complains about liberal congressmen who support the demonstrations...and about unruly protestors rolling in from colleges and high schools.

RN: High school kids aren't as likely to get rough are they?

HRR: Oh, no, they use pot too.

RN: Well, I see I see.

HRR: The roughness pretty much gets related to the drugs. They get doped up, you know?

RN: They get doped up and they bust the windows.

HRR: That's when they cut loose.

RN: Well, I want them to break those windows up in the Capitol, that's the best thing that could happen to those Congressmen.

Kutler: Fight is the metaphor for his life. He's a man who's always fighting, always engaged in battle.

Historian Stanley Kutler sued the government in 1992 to get all of Nixon's Watergate tapes made public.

Kutler: Throughout his life, throughout his public career, he's a man at war with himself; between what he really believes and what he decides he has to do for political reasons, all sorts of necessities. And therein lies the real tragedy of Richard Nixon.

The contrast between Nixon's beliefs and presidential behavior is especially sharp when it comes to race. In the late 1960s, the country was torn by white protests against desegregation and violence touched off by the assassination of Martin Luther King Junior. Nixon ran for president under the slogan "bring us together"...but the tapes show a different attitude.

Nixon: Asians are capable of governing themselves, one way or another. The Latins do it in a miserable way, but they do it. But the Africans just can't run things. {fade under}

In 1971 Nixon reads a memo by UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan on the practice of ranking racial groups by IQ scores. Nixon has called Moynihan, a Harvard-sociologist, to share his views on the subject. Compared to whites, Nixon thinks blacks don't always measure up.

RN: Athletics is not a bad achievement. And music, the dance. Now, these things, are they are they to be there to be just pissed upon? Hell no. They're important. But on the other hand, when you get to some of the more profound, rigid disciplines, basically. They have a hell of a time making it

Despite this view...Nixon believes every American deserves an equal chance to get ahead.

Kutler: For all that one may say of him, Richard Nixon did have a core. He had a center as a human being. He had a moral value system that had been deeply instilled into him by his mother.

Hannah Milhaus Nixon raised her son in a Christian household. Accustomed to hard work and little money, Richard often identified with the underdog. In his phone call, Nixon tells Moynihan that he and his Administration are obligated to deny that minorities are inferior.

Nixon: If we do not, we are going to we're going to encourage what is a latent prejudice among all of us. I'm putting it out all over this place, that we have got to proceed on the assumption, not that everybody is equal, but that everybody should have an equal opportunity. And that anybody might go to the top.

Nixon himself, was not the most likely man to go to the top. He was shy and introverted, but he also had a photographic memory and an analytical mind. He had the talent, but not the money to go to an Ivy League school. Nixon felt insecure about his credentials, even in the White House.

Operator: Yes please?
Nixon: Get me attorney general Mitchell.
Operator: Thank you, sir.

In October 1971 Nixon is considering candidates for the US Supreme Court. Some of his choices have already been panned in the press as mediocre. In a call with Attorney General John Mitchell, Nixon wonders, in frustration, whether a potential nominee to the Court - a man who was Dean of Fordham law school in New York - would pass muster.

RN: I like the fact it isn't the number one law school. God damn it, I didn't go to a number one law school, John. Ah, where'd you go? You go to Harvard?
JM: Not recently.
RN: No.
JM: As a matter of fact I was touted off from going to Harvard.
RN: Well, the whole point is that this number one law school bulls--t is getting me down a little, isn't it you?
JM: It has for about thirty years. They just don't produce the product.
RN: Well sure, look, you've seen a lot of Harvard men around, they're soft in the head. And they don't work as hard. But, now, this Fordham man may be alright. I've seen some pretty good Fordham graduates, haven't you?
JM: Yes, I have. As a matter of fact, they're spread all over the Northeast and doing a hell of a lot better than the people from Harvard. [fades under]

Surely, the President knows that John Mitchell is a Fordham graduate. Nixon himself went to Duke. But, beyond class-rank and school prestige, he tells Mitchell about other qualities he's looking for in a Supreme Court nominee...qualities his aid will help him ponder in private. Historian Mel Small:

Another consideration always is what are the political implications. And he's not, by the way, talking abortion rights or affirmative action... he's talking about the political implications for him in terms of the Republican party. You never see that in memos, in public statements, the president saying I think we're going with candidate X because candidate X will help the Republic party in Georgia in 1972.

And when Richard Nixon considers Justice Department lawyer, William Rehnquist, for the Supreme Court, he and John Mitchell calculate the political mileage the President may gain - or lose - with religious voters.

RN: Incidentally, what is Rehnquist? I suppose he's a damn Protestant.
JM: I'm sure of that. He's just as WASPish and WASPish can be.
RN: Yeah, well, that's too damn bad. Tell him to change his religion.
JM: [chortles] All right I'll get him baptized this afternoon.
RN: Well, baptized and castrated, no, they don't do that, I mean they circumci - no, that's the Jews. Well anyway, however he is, get him changed.

The raft of secret recordings Nixon made in office allows us to listen in on one of the most important decisions of his presidency. Nixon's appointment of William Rehnquist will shift the Court in a profoundly conservative direction.

Operator: The President is on the line, Sir.
Nixon: Hi there... {fades under}

Nixon's recording system was more extensive than Kennedy's or Johnson's...and his recording gear was voice activated -- whenever he walked into a room or picked up a phone, tape would roll. That would prove fateful.

Nixon: You know, people say impeach the president. Well, then they get Agnew. What the hell? {laughter}

Beginning in 1972...the man who is perpetually at war with himself is also in a battle to save his presidency. Richard Nixon's White House is slowly drowning in a rising tide of scandal. A botched attempt to bug the Democratic Party's headquarters in June has been tied to Nixon's reelection campaign.

News tape: In a federal courthouse in Washington, Judge John Sirica sentences four conspirators to jail. But they are only bit players in the larger drama of Watergate.

Nixon: I had no prior knowledge of the Watergate break-in.

Evidence of a cover-up and other political wrong-doing leads closer and closer to the Oval Office...and Nixon's closest aides, Bob Haldeman and John Erlichman. In April 1973, Nixon decides he must get rid of the two men. But he is miserable about asking his most trusted aids to resign...and on April 29th, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger calls to console him.

Operator: Dr. Kissinger

RN: Hello.

HK: Hello, Mr. President

RN: Hi, Henry, how are you?

HK: Okay. I didn't have, really have anything. I just wanted to call you to tell you I was thinking of-

RN: Oh, sure. Well, that's fine, Henry... [fades under]

Small: Kissinger and Nixon are close colleagues but not close friends.

Mel Small.

Small: Kissinger he trusted far less than he trusted Haldeman and Erlichman. With good reason, because Kissinger was continually undercutting him, particularly, and of course he tapes Kissinger's phones to find this out, Kissinger is telling his pals in the New York liberal media about what an awful president Nixon is or how hard he is on Vietnam and the like. Conversely, whenever Kissinger speaks to Nixon he's always flattering, and he's a wonderful sycophant.

KISSINGER: Mr. President, no one can undo the achievements, none of these packs of jackals.

PRESIDENT NIXON: Well, look, and in the end-

KISSINGER: It is the achievements that are-

PRESIDENT NIXON: -and in the end-now let's not. In the end, remember, within a year people are not going to be thinking of this. They're going to be thinking of what we've been doing, Henry so don't you worry about that.

KISSINGER: Within three months, Mr. President, no one will be able to-

PRESIDENT NIXON: Frankly, people are getting Goddamn sick of it now, you know. You pick up a paper and it's Watergate, Watergate ... {X-FADE TO}

Nixon TV speech: Good evening: I want to talk to you tonight from my heart... {fade under}

On April 30th...Richard Nixon goes on national television and, for the first time, speaks directly about Watergate.

Nixon: I first learned from news reports of the Watergate break-in. I was appalled at this senseless, illegal action... {fade under}

The president announces a shake-up of his administration, including resignations...

Nixon: ...resignations of two of my closest associates in the White House-Bob Haldeman, John Ehrlichman-two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know...{fade under}

After the Oval Office speech, Nixon retreats to his private quarters to wait for the telephone calls that typically follow his TV appearances. Bob Haldeman is the first to get through.

PRESIDENT NIXON: Hello?

HALDEMAN: Hi.

PRESIDENT NIXON: I hope I didn't let you down.

HALDEMAN: No, sir. You got your points over, and now you and now you've got it set right and move on. You're right where you ought to be.

PRESIDENT NIXON: Well, it's a tough thing, Bob, for you and for John and the rest, but, Goddamn it, I'm never going to discuss the son-of-a-bitching Watergate thing again-never, never, never, never... {fade under}

Nixon is tired, distraught and may have been drinking. His speech is slurred.

PRESIDENT NIXON: But let me say you're a strong man, Goddamnit, and I love you.

HALDEMAN: [nervous laugh] Well-

PRESIDENT NIXON: And, and I love John and all the rest, and, by God, keep the faith. Keep the faith. You're going to win this son of a bitch.

HALDEMAN: Absolutely.

{fade under}

Kutler: What's really going on is a lot of maudlin self-pity on Nixon's part.

Historian Stanley Kutler.

Kutler: He's feeling isolated, he's feeling lonely. He starts off, complains to Haldeman, "Nobody's called me!" And Haldeman very quietly says, "But you left orders that no calls were to come through."

NIXON: I don't know whether you can call and get any reactions and call me back...{fade under}

Kutler: He Says to Haldeman -- like nothing has happened - he says, can you go out and check the reaction to the speech? And Haldeman says, I think not.

NIXON: Well, would you mind?

HALDEMAN: I don't think I can. I don't-

PRESIDENT NIXON: No, I agree.

HALDEMAN: I'm in kind of an odd spot to try and do that

PRESIDENT NIXON: Don't call a goddamn soul. The hell with it... {fade under}

Kutler: He says, "I understand" and so forth. Actually he understands but he really wanted him to do it.

PRESIDENT NIXON: ...God bless you, boy. God bless you. I love you, as you know.

HALDEMAN: Okay.

PRESIDENT NIXON: Like my brother.

HALDEMAN: Well, we'll go on and up from here.

PRESIDENT NIXON: All right, boy. Keep the faith.

HALDEMAN: Right

Though he vows to keep fighting...Richard Nixon later says the Presidency lost all joy for him on that night of April 30th, 1973.

Kutler: He is naked to his enemies. Haldeman and Erlichman were his chief line of defense. They're gone. There's no one there now but Nixon. And there is within the confines of his offices the evidence that will incriminate him and force his resignation, namely the tapes.

Thompson: Mr. Butterfield, were you aware of the installation of any listening devices in the Oval Office of the President?

July 1973...US Senate investigative hearings on Watergate.

Butterfield: I was aware of listening devices. Yes sir.

White house aid Alexander Butterfield reveals the President's secret recording system. Nixon immediately orders that taping stop. But he loses a battle with Watergate prosecutors to keep the existing tapes private...and the revelations force him to resign in August of 1974. When Vice President Gerald Ford takes over he has the recording system removed. As far as we know, this is the end of secret taping in the White House.

Music cue... Montage of pres tapes

Operator: Hello?

LBJ: I left my telephone on...

{fade under}

All told, Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon recorded more than 4600 hours of conversation, opening a rare window on the inner workings of the White House.

JFK: We don't plan to invade Cuba under these conditions anyway... {fade under}

Historians are using the tapes to revise our understanding of these presidents and their times. While the revelations on the recordings can be stunning, historian Stanley Kutler says the tapes are an imperfect record.

Kutler: Quite simply, there are moments that they are not to be trusted. Richard Nixon contrived conversations for a record.

Nixon: I didn't know about the Watergate... {fade under}

Kutler: There are times that it is very clear, we have a valuable source, there are times that it is very clear this is a contrived, very controlled conversation. And thirdly there are times we don't know.

LBJ: ...We've got to pass that bill come hell or high water...{fade under}

Branch: I think these tapes are a democratizing glimpse into how our government really works.

Historian Taylor Branch:

Branch: They humanize the institution of the presidency in a way that's good for all Americans because we tend to think of these great impersonal institutional imperial forces and everything and forget that the president is is just a person like all of us.

LBJ: Honey?

Lady Bird: Yes dear.

LBJ: You go on and eat a bite and I'll come on when I can. I'm gonna be tied up.

Lady Bird: Oh, you poor blessed man, I'm so sorry.

LBJ: I'll be there before you go to bed...

Lady Bird: Well good night, darling.

LBJ: Bye.

Branch: Often flummoxed, sometimes passionate...

JFK: You just sank the Air Force budget. They're crazy up there. Are they crazy?

Branch: And that a lot of things that perplex us, perplex them as well...

LBJ: Operator?

OP: Yes Mr. President?

LBJ: This is... {click} I can't get this disconnected...

Branch: The presidential tapes shouldn't be just entertainment..

Nixon: God dammit, the military they're a bunch of greedy bastards that want more officers clubs and more men to shine their shoes...

Branch: ...but it's not bad that they are entertainment...they are entertaining because they are so human.

And there's still more to hear. It takes time to catalog and copy the White House recordings and declassify tapes that involve national security. So far just about half have been released by the National Archives. There are roughly 2400 hours of presidential tapes to go.

LBJ: I'll just try to be worthy of it and, why, when you need me, why I'm close as the telephone. {hangs up}

Music up.

CREDITS: The President Calling was produced by Stephen Smith and Kate Ellis. It was edited by Deborah George. Coordinating producer, Sasha Aslanian...with help from Misha Quill, Ellen Guettler, Sarah Lancaster and Phoebe Larsen. Our web producer is Ochen Kaylen. Special thanks to David Shreve and the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. The executive producer for American RadioWorks is Bill Buzenberg. I'm Stephen Smith.

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